

# Complex Television

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Jason Mittell's text on the emergence of complex television arrives at an interesting juncture in the analysis and discussion of contemporary American television. Recent popular and academic discourses have focused on the idea that audiences are experiencing a third 'golden age' of 'quality television'. Key series are identified and analysed as exemplars of quality television, constructing markers of distinction between such programming and its implied 'other'. Mittell's text consciously moves beyond the analytical framework of 'good' and 'bad' television, to make a wider argument about the nature of contemporary television and the evaluative frameworks used to discuss it. Mittell argues that the television industry, as a whole, has experienced a paradigm shift in how stories are told; to the point that a network series with a "temporally fractured narrative technique" (2015:11) goes unremarked. For Mittell, such techniques of storytelling have become "narrative norms rather than exceptional outliers" (2015:48) and the key aim in *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* is to analyse how this complex storytelling mode developed. Each chapter discusses a specific aspect of complex TV, from beginnings to endings, with issues of authorship, character, comprehension and evaluation discussed in the spaces in between. His text brings to the fore the ways in which complex television constructs meaning, highlighting the formal techniques of the medium that, are often, taken for granted. Mittell's book makes an important contribution to the study of television. It brings to the forefront of our consciousness the processes by which television narratives are made to mean, but most importantly it treats complex television with the seriousness it deserves. Mittell's text is peppered with timely challenges to traditional ways of seeing and categorizing television, and while he is making claims for the specific pleasures to be gained from complex storytelling, he recognizes that this does not mean one has to "belittle or marginalize other forms of pleasure" (2015:217). Mittell provides the conceptual tools for further research into the formal properties of television storytelling and deepens our understanding of television as a 'lived cultural practice'.

Mittell's discussion of complex television draws upon the concept of poetics to delineate the formal properties of television as a medium. Poetics "can be defined broadly as a focus on the specific ways that texts make meaning" (2015:4) through an analysis of their form. In focusing on the formal qualities of television, Mittell is utilising a mode of analysis associated more readily with art and

literature. That complex television merits such a mode of analysis, suggests that there has been a shift in the way in which television, as a cultural form, is now understood. For Mittell, this cultural shift in the 'medium's legitimacy' is most clearly seen in the creative talent drawn to the medium, but it is also sign-posted in the ways in which television series are "judged as part of a larger aesthetic field" (2015:37), displayed on shelves alongside films, music and books. This cultural shift has been accompanied by a range of economic, technological and industrial changes that have helped shape the wider context in which complex television has emerged. The development of cable television channels, for example, has meant that the size of the audience for programmes has shrunk. Mittell suggests, however, that the television industry has 'recalibrated its expectations' of what is considered a success, and programmes with small ratings, often linked to a consistent cult audience, may still provide 'lucrative results' in economic terms. A further catalyst for the development of complex television has been the alteration in the role of cable television. HBO's commissioning and production of original series and the emergence of 'showrunners' with storytelling cache, has been duplicated by other cable channels; resulting in a range of series which are not bound by the storytelling restrictions found on network television.

Mittell recognises that much of narrative television continues to be confined within the classic story telling framework, and he acknowledges that this mode of storytelling, done well, provides immense pleasure to viewers. Yet his analysis of complex television also details the different pleasures to be gained from such complex narratives. Mittell suggests that narrative complexity emerged in the 1990s with series such as *The X Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* but has been refined and developed since then. Both series combine what Mittell considers to be a key formal property of complex television, "an interplay between the demands of episodic and serial storytelling, often oscillating between long-term arcs and stand-alone episodes" (2015:19); but this is, in many respects, the bare minimum required of the form. Other features include interwoven plotlines and a "more conscious mode of storytelling" which is allied to a deep investment in explicit reflexivity. This meta-reflexive framework allows the creators of complex television to put their mode of storytelling on display and deepen the aesthetic pleasures derived from such viewing. Mittell suggests that such series operate with an '*operational aesthetic*' in which viewers come to learn the formal patterns of storytelling pertaining to their chosen series, which is associated with an awareness of the '*intrinsic norms*' of each storytelling framework. Audience awareness of these norms allows the creators of complex television to subvert and play with the expectations of the audience. This self-reflexive play produces '*narrative special effects*', an '*operational reflexivity*' that draws viewers back to how the story is being told, as well as producing anticipation about how the narrative is to play out.

Mittell discusses a range of examples of operational reflexivity, including the high reflexivity and knowing contrivance of plot in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* or the shock narrative leap, 'one year later' in *Battlestar Galactica* or the writers of *Lost* playing with the intrinsic storytelling norms of their series. The operational aesthetic of complex television includes a range of other narrative devices that manipulate 'discourse time' (how the story is told within a given narrative) and the storytelling mode. These include flashbacks and flash forwards, repeating stories from multiple perspectives and jumbling chronologies (2015:26), albeit toward some linear play out of the story. As Mittell (2015:46) suggests "these complex narratives invite viewers to engage at the level of the formal analyst, dissecting the techniques used to convey spectacular displays of storytelling craft; this mode of formally aware viewing is highly encouraged by these programs, as their pleasures are embedded in a level of awareness that transcends the traditional focus on diegetic action that is typical of most mainstream popular narratives". Mittell is clear that this focus on form is not equivalent to the 'alienating effects' associated with modernism; instead it is allied to the pleasures of watching complex television, where we are encouraged to "simultaneously care about the story and marvel at its storytelling" (2015:45). In addition, the attention paid to form, is understood as a 'pay off' leading to "complex but coherent comprehension" (2015:50). Mittell perhaps undervalues viewers' wider formal and narrative competencies here by restricting the affect of form to this 'pay off'. Nevertheless, the desire for full comprehension highlights that the audience acceptance of complex TV, is also accompanied by more traditional expectations of what a story is supposed to do.

Mittell argues that one may find different modes of storytelling in complex TV. He utilises the concepts of *centrifugal* and *centripetal complexity* (drawing from the earlier work of the Bakhtin Circle) to discuss the contrasting narrative frameworks found in *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. Mittell suggests that, "it is hard to imagine two programmes within the general norms of crime drama that take such different approaches to narrative, visual and sonic style" (2015:219). In *The Wire*, the "on-going narrative pulses outward" (2015:222) and this centrifugal complexity allows the series to encompass the vast range of characters and social scope that it does. In contrast, in *Breaking Bad*, the centripetal forces of the narrative "pulls actions and characters inward towards a gravitational centre" (2015:223) leading inexorably to Walter White's full exposure as Heisenberg. He goes on to suggest that "through the dual vectors of vast centrifugal and dense centripetal complexity, we can have a better sense of how various series create their story-worlds and characters and help establish expectations for narrative payoffs" (2015:225). Mittell is particularly invested in getting the reader to recognise that they are both good, yet very different series, whose serialized storytelling strategies should be evaluated on their own aesthetic terms.

For Mittell, complex television is largely serial television, and “seriality itself is defined by its use of time” (2015:27). Time functions as both an extrinsic and intrinsic norm; intrinsically in the expectation that a serial has a cumulative narrative leading to some end point; and extrinsically in the formal conventions of screen time, which includes the temporal “gap in episodic instalments” (2015:27). It is in the gap between the episodes that viewers continue their engagement with a series. This includes forms of ‘*anticipatory hypothesizing*’, curiosity about the narrative and the development of forms of *alignment* and *attachment* to key characters. This process of anticipatory hypothesizing applies to all serial television, and the intense emotional affect that serial television engenders, is reinforced by the long-term commitment required to engage with a serial narrative to its end. Mittell avoids positing emotional affect as a marker of low (and gendered) cultural value because he recognises that emotional affect is embedded in the formal properties of serial storytelling, and as such, it is a crucial element in the development of viewer engagement with a series. Mittell argues that the pleasures to be gained from complex TV are different from mainstream TV because audiences are drawn to the formal features of the storytelling mode as well as the actual story itself. This dual pleasure leads to deep audience engagement with complex TV, prompting Mittell to argue that the meaning making processes in complex TV are not confined to the text but also emerge out of an audiences’ paratextual engagement with a programme.

The emergence of forms of paratextual engagement runs in tandem with the wider technological shifts that accompany the emergence of complex TV. Online fan culture has been “essential to the success of complex television” (2015:275) and it is a crucial feature of paratextual forms of viewer engagement. Mittell cites his own paratextual engagement with the series *Lost* to demonstrate how a story may expand beyond its textual borders. *Lost* developed a significant online presence that encompassed wiki sites, blogs hypothesizing plot and character development, canonical and non-canonical fan fiction, fan produced temporal and geographical schemata, videos and so on. Tensions may arise between canonical and non-canonical paratexts, but this ‘transmedia storytelling’ promotes a level of analysis and interpretation absent from most television viewing. This paratextual discourse expands the narrative framework of a series but is, by its very nature, transitory. Nonetheless, the effort that fans dedicate to ‘*drilling*’ to the root of their chosen series reinforces the importance of such series to their audiences. This paratextual engagement highlights how “contemporary television broadens the possible textual pleasures and corresponding modes of engagement available to viewers, fostering a mode of forensic fandom that appears to be an essential type of 21<sup>st</sup> –century consumption” (2015:291).

This would seem to be an appropriate juncture to conclude this review of Mittell's book. Much has been left for the reader to discover by themselves, as a number of important concepts and ideas have not been addressed here. Since Mittell wishes to start a conversation about the formal properties of contemporary storytelling, many of these will be addressed through the wider dialogical engagement with his work. It seems churlish to proffer critiques of Mittell's book because it is an open, wide-ranging and refreshing commentary on contemporary television. There are, however, some areas where more depth would have been useful. While there is some sense of how the television industry has managed the shift to a diversified media landscape, the sections on the economics of complex TV seem underdeveloped. In addition, one may ask, to what extent has the storytelling limits and wider challenges associated with film production affected the rise in television's prestige. Film actors taking roles in the serial melodramas of complex TV seems to be one sign of this shift. There are also moments in the book where there is a slippage in how concepts are used. Furthermore, some concepts seem piece-meal and bear less fruit than others, but this may be expected in a book of this scope. Some of the wider literature on formal shifts within specific genres is under used, so there is, at times, a tension between breadth and depth. Perhaps this is only noticeable if one has an interest in a specific generic form. There are other comments that may be made about television and the television industry but they are beyond the scope of Mittell's book and this review. To reach an actual ending, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* should be read by anyone who wishes to take the analysis of television seriously. It deepens our understanding of the formal properties of television and is a fecund source of concepts and ideas that we, as readers, are expressly invited to engage with.

Mittell, Jason (2015) *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*.

New York and London: New York University Press.

